

## Skill, luck, and mere actions in grammar

Bridget Copley, SFL (CNRS/Paris 8)

Cova (2016) proposes what we might call an “intentional pluralism” account of intentional action, where “intentionally” can have the following construals: (A) A positive meaning, according to which someone does something intentionally when he actively does it based on his or her desire to do it; (B) A ... meaning according to which someone does something intentionally when he does it without being forced to do it. In this sense, “intentionally” is opposed to “unwillingly” or “by force”; (C) A ... meaning according to which someone does something intentionally when he does it by having full control upon his action. In this sense, “intentionally” is opposed to “by accident” or “by sheer luck”. In this talk I will consolidate (if not quite unify) these three meanings, and align them very broadly with cross-linguistic facts in the Austronesian, South Slavic, and Salish language families. To achieve these goals I present an account of how action is represented in natural language grammar, relying on particular treatments of causation and intention. We end up with several ways to refer to action: mere action on the one hand, and on the other, four kinds of dispositionally-caused action based on the features internal/external and intention/disposition. In “skill” cases, the cause is an intention internal to the actor; in “luck” cases the cause is a disposition external to the actor.

**Mere actions:** It is possible in English and many other languages to refer to a “mere” action, that is, without regard to whether it is intentional or accidental. This gives us a sense of agenthood that is also independent of intentionality or accidentality. “Process” theories of causation that give us access to representations of energy transfer (e.g. Kistler 2006, Wolff 2007) can be useful here, in that an agent might be understood as the source of the energy that goes into the action (Copley & Harley 2015). (The notion of agent that is needed will be further elaborated.) Mere actions can themselves be directly caused, either by another action, or by a state such as the intentional state of the agent. The directness of the causation is linguistically significant; see Martin 2018.

**Dispositionally-caused action:** Intentions, I argue, are a kind of disposition. That is, intentions share with “ordinary” dispositions a formal structure even though they have interpretational differences. The evidence for this lies in the fact that intentions and dispositions are often treated the same by grammar (Copley 2018). For instance, *have*-causatives in English can take animate subjects or inanimate subjects, as shown in (1). If an inanimate subject, it is a property/state/causal power of the subject that causes my laughter. If an animate subject, it can similarly be a property of the subject as in (1a), or it can be an intentional state of the subject, as in (1a), where Mary has authority to impose her intention on my action. Intentions can cause more things than ordinary dispositions, as we can see from the fact that (1b) is not possible with an inanimate subject.

- (1) a. Mary/the book had me calling my mother.
- b. Mary/\*the book had me call my mother.

Such cases have been discussed in the literature for Vendlerian accomplishments (Folli & Harley 2005) and nominalizations (Sichel 2010; Alexiadou et al. 2013), among others. Intentions and ordinary dispositions can thus be argued to share a formal structure: a state  $s$  is (i) held by an individual  $x$ , and is (ii) intensionally directed toward a (propositional) goal  $p$ , and (iii) causes an event  $e$  (under certain circumstances  $C$ , as per Fara 2001, but these will not be important in the cases we are looking at). Grammars may, or may not, distinguish intentions from other dispositions. Intention and ordinary disposition are *not* the two kinds of dispositional causes for mere actions that I have promised, however. Instead it is whether the causing dispositional state is internal or external to the actor. If the causing state is internal, it can be either an intention or an “ordinary” disposition; either one I call “Skill”; so the cases in (1) are to be considered cases of Skill. If the causing state is external and an ordinary disposition, we are dealing with “Luck”.

**Consolidating Cova’s proposal:** This picture of mere action, Skill, and Luck, if correct, would allow us to consolidate Cova’s three meanings for “intentionally”. (A) refers to action directly caused by an (intentional) disposition internal to the actor, i.e. Skill. (B) refers to a mere action which is directly caused by a mere action or intention external to the actor. (C) refers to an action not caused by any external disposition, i.e., not Luck. So (A) specifies that the direct cause for the action is internal (and an intention), while (B) and (C) specify that the direct cause for the action is not external. (A) and (B)+(C) may be equivalent in the ontology of English functional morphology, but perhaps not cross-linguistically, because of the possibility for internal ordinary dispositional causes and external intentional causes as well as totally uncaused mere actions.

**Cross-linguistic evidence** Languages can grammatically distinguish internal/external and intentional/dispositional causes in their episodic verb forms. (Additional distinctions may also be reflected.) External intentions and internal dispositions (e.g. Skwxwú7mesh out of control forms (Jacobs, 2007) and South Slavic involuntary state constructions (Rivero 2009)) are also possible causes. Luck forms are, like English lexical “manage to”, compatible with both bad luck and good luck, and mere action forms, when competing with dispositional forms, have a “suddenly” use where the action is understood to be uncaused. I argue that Tagalog distinguishes between a Neutral verb form that gets a Skill reading, and an Ability/Involuntary action form that gets Luck readings ((2)). The St’át’cimets out of control form, I propose, conveys either mere action (“suddenly”) or Luck ((3)).

- (2) Skill vs. Luck: Tagalog (Alonso-Ovalle & Hsieh 2017)
- a. B[**in**]uks-an ni Lisa ang pinto.  
[PFV.NTL] open-LV GEN Lisa NOM door  
‘Lisa opened the door (deliberately).’
  - b. Na-**buks**-an ni Lisa ang pinto.  
PFV.**AIA**-open-LV GEN Lisa NOM door  
‘Lisa managed to open the door. / Lisa accidentally opened the door.’
- (3) One form for mere action and Luck: St’át’cimets out of control form (Davis et al. 2009)
- a. **ka**-lhexw-a ta=n-sqax7=a  
**ka**-appear-**a** det=1sg.poss-dog=exis  
‘My dog appeared suddenly.’
  - b. **ka**-qám’t-s=kan-**a** ta=wa7 ts’aq’-n-an  
**ka**-hit-caus=1sg.subj-**a** det=impf throw-dir-1sg.erg snimulh1 1pl. emph.  
‘I managed to hit the target.’

Both contrast with English, in which episodic verbs typically express mere action (with some lexical inclusion of intention in verbs such as *murder*). Intriguingly, the acquisition of the implicit understanding that the English verb forms are mere action forms, and not Skill forms, in the absence of contrasting grammatical forms may not be straightforward, as shown in (4):

- (4) Zoe (3;10), replying to “Someone lost their hat”: “Why did they want to lose their hat?”

**Selected references:** Alonso-Ovalle, L. & H. Hsieh 2017. Causes and expectations: On the interpretation of the Tagalog ability/involuntary action form. SALT 27. Copley, B. 2018. *Dispositional causation. Glossa*, 3(1). Cova, F. (2016 ms.). The folk concept of intentional action: Empirical approaches. In W. Buckwalter J. Sytsma (Eds.), *Blackwell Companion to Experimental Philosophy*. . Davis, H. et al. 2009. Out of control marking as circumstantial modality in St’át’cimets. In L. Hogeweg, H. de Hoop, and A. Malchukov (eds.), *Cross-linguistic semantics of tense, aspect and modality*.